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op-ed submission: Azerbaijan's postponed Formula 1 race transcends sports

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To: Rob Shimshock <rshimshock@mrc.org>

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Hi Rob,

How are you? Although I haven't heard back from you regarding my last couple of op-ed submissions (and I'm sure you're overwhelmed with all the COVID-19 content coming your way), I'm hoping the attached piece will be of interest, particularly because it revisits the themes of a previous op-ed I wrote for CNSNews.com back in 2017: https://www.cnsnews.com/commentary/jacob-kamaras/azerbaijans-winning-formula-motorsports-muslim-holidays-and-freedom

I write that despite the event's postponement this year, the annual Formula 1 auto race hosted by Muslim-majority Azerbaijan — particularly during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan — is a powerful display of religious freedom, especially in a world plagued by sectarian conflict and now by the invisible enemy of the coronavirus. While Ramadan is ongoing until May 23, I also note the significance of the dual independence days observed this month by Azerbaijan (May 28) and Israel (April 29), the nations whose Jewish-Muslim alliance defies conventions.

The full text of my piece is also below, and it seems my headshot is already in the CNSNews.com system. Please let me know if you're interested in running this, and thanks so much as always for your time and consideration!

Azerbaijan's postponed Formula 1 race transcends sports

By Jacob Kamaras

Lost in the shuffle of the high-profile sporting events cancelled worldwide is the 2020 <u>Azerbaijan</u> <u>Grand Prix</u>, which had been scheduled for June 7. While the postponed auto race in Baku surely doesn't garner the same attention as the suspended National Basketball Association or delayed Major League Baseball seasons, its significance transcends sports.

Three years ago, this annual Formula 1 race was held on the eve of Eid al-Fitr, the holiday that marks the end of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. Such a convergence of religious and secular festivities could never occur in Saudi Arabia or Iran, the world's Sunni and Shi'a powers.

Yet in Azerbaijan — whose population is more than 90-percent Muslim — proper separation of church and state enable the Grand Prix to stand out as a powerful display of religious freedom. In fact, Gallup has documented Azerbaijan as one of the world's most secular countries, a finding rarely associated with Muslim-majority states.

This year's Azerbaijan Grand Prix was not scheduled to coincide with Ramadan. But the sentiments surrounding the 2017 event still resonate today, especially in a world plagued by sectarian conflict and now by the invisible enemy of COVID-19.

Holding the Grand Prix in Azerbaijan carries more than symbolism. It provides an instructive

paradigm for peace and unity. Well before it began hosting the Formula 1 race in 2016, Azerbaijan established diplomatic ties with Israel. Since 1992, an alliance which many have dubbed an "improbable romance" between Muslim and Jewish states has continuously flourished in the economic, cultural, and security arenas, long preceding today's growing rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world. Not for decades, but for centuries, Azerbaijan's "Mountain Jews" have enjoyed full protection as a religious minority and have reportedly not been subjected to anti-Semitism.

Now, <u>Azerbaijan</u> and <u>Israel</u> are again setting an example for the world by effectively containing the spread of coronavirus in proportional terms. This comes during a month of milestones for each nation — Israel celebrated its 72nd Independence Day on April 29, while the 102nd anniversary of the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic's (ADR) founding will be marked May 28.

Azerbaijan was the first parliamentary republic to be established in the Muslim world. But it's easy to forget that the ADR era lasted a mere two years. In 1920, Vladimir Lenin's Russia invaded Azerbaijan, which didn't regain independence until the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991.

From the Arab rejection of the U.N. Partition Plan in 1947, to the 1948-49 War of Independence, to the reunification of Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War, the road to modern Israel also came with its twists and turns.

Despite those complications, a far less prosperous present would exist if history were rewritten. What if Azerbaijan weren't founded as a secular Muslim nation? What if Israel weren't established as a democratic Jewish state? In any such scenario, this stereotype-shattering alliance wouldn't provide the inspiration and paradigm it does today. The same holds true for the Azerbaijan Grand Prix, which wouldn't make the same statement in a secular state without a Muslim majority.

Azerbaijan defies conventions on religious freedom. That's precisely why Rev. Johnnie Moore, commissioner of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), issued a dissenting opinion on the recommendation in USCIRF's recently released 2020 report to "include Azerbaijan on the U.S. Department of State's Special Watch List for engaging in or tolerating severe violations of religious freedom pursuant to the International Religious Freedom Act."

"Azerbaijan does not meet the threshold necessary to be included in this report," Moore wrote April 28. "As I have said before: it is a country where Sunni and Shi'a clerics pray together, where Evangelical and Russian Orthodox Christians serve together, and where thriving Jewish communities enjoy freedom and total security in their almost entirely Islamic country. It is a Muslim-majority country that has hosted prominent Hindu leaders and it is a Shi'a majority neighbor of Iran whose commitment to peace led it long ago to forge a vibrant, public, and diplomatic relationship with the state of Israel. Azerbaijan has had the challenge of bringing religious freedom into a post-Soviet legal framework, but — even in this — it has achieved much more than any of its neighbors."

The following could easily be added to Moore's analysis: Muslim-majority Azerbaijan has hosted the

Grand Prix, a major international sporting event, during Ramadan. No nation is immune from criticism. But it's only fair to judge Azerbaijan in relative terms, and in the context of the rest of the Muslim world.

Jacob Kamaras, former editor in chief of the Jewish News Syndicate, is noted for his work on the Middle East and American politics. His writing has appeared in the Washington Times, Independent Journal Review, the American Spectator, and various Jewish and Israeli media.

Best, Jacob Kamaras Founder Stellar Jay Communications 646-338-5946

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